
Gaza Strip: tomorrow the whole parish will pray with Pope Francis. Father Romanelli: “He has been calling us on every day”

“Can you hear the rumble of the plane? That's it, now they're bombing”: the voice of Sister **Nabila Saleh**, member of the congregation of the Sisters of the Rosary, is suddenly muffled by the noise of an Israeli aircraft. Speaking to SIR from inside the Latin parish of the Holy Family in Gaza, Sister Saleh has been trying to tell us about the situation in Gaza for days. Nearly 700 displaced people have taken refuge in the parish complex. The number has increased since the Israeli air raid on the nearby Greek Orthodox parish of St Porphyry, which left 18 dead and dozens wounded. “The situation is getting harsher and more critical by the day. The bombing continues. Yesterday, Israeli air raids hit the area near our parish. We are tired and worried, the children cannot sleep, the families are finding it harder and harder to live under the bombs”. Yesterday, the Latin Patriarch of Jerusalem, Card. **Pierbattista Pizzaballa**, sent a heartfelt message to the Christian community in Gaza: “it brought us some relief - said the nun - these words were good for our souls.”



There are also 'bodies' that need care and treatment: “We ask that the bombs and rockets stop, the people of Gaza are overwhelmed,” the nun pleaded. “Our community includes the elderly, the disabled and children. It tears my heart to see them in this situation. I wonder what they have done to deserve such a fate.”

“Where has humanity, law, respect for life gone: where? Under the bombs.”

“Food, water, electricity are scarce, but we hold out. Gaza is in ruins, there is rubble everywhere. But the most important thing is to stay alive. There will be time to rebuild.” “Last night we remained inside the church because of the rockets and bombs exploding nearby,” adds Sister **Maria del Pilar**, missionary of the Institute of the Incarnate Word (IVE) in Gaza. “None of our parishioners were wounded, but there was much fear, especially among the children. After almost three weeks of war, we are all well in the parish and I consider it a miracle. There are about 700 displaced people here, a total of 132 families, each with their own problems, thoughts, fears. Nevertheless, we are living together and helping each other, sparing no effort.” **The Pope's phone calls.** The greatest consolation for the Christians of Gaza is “Pope Francis' daily phone call to speak with us,” said Sister Pilar, who just yesterday told the Pope directly about the situation in the parish: “I also told him about the bombings and the rockets. It is a great consolation for us to be able to listen to his words”. “The Pope calls us every day,” Father **Gabriel Romanelli**, parish priest in Gaza, told SIR from Bethlehem, where he has been stranded since the outbreak of the war. “He transmits his prayers, his closeness and his concern. He always reminds us to look after the children and to pray a lot. Every day, at the end of the phone call, he blesses us all.”



Father

Romanelli immediately welcomed the Pope's invitation to pray: "Tomorrow we will join Pope Francis for the Day of Fasting and Penance, and we too will dedicate an hour to prayer, to implore peace in the world. The Christians in Gaza will be the first. They have been preparing for Holy Mass since the early hours of the morning. There are two services a day, the recitation of the Rosary and continuous Adoration." "Everyone, children, young people, old people, families, are gathered in prayer, an unceasing prayer that comes from every corner of the parish, as if in response to the sound of bombs and rockets." The parish priest also thanked the Latin Patriarch, Card. Pizzaballa, for his "words of closeness, affection and for his firm commitment in favour of our faithful, which he sent us yesterday through a video message." The Patriarch, the cleric recalled, "knows all our faithful one by one. His words come from the depths of his heart and confirm the Latin Patriarchate's commitment to peace throughout the Gaza Strip". In the midst of this humanitarian emergency, the parish is trying to do what it can: "What little we manage to buy or receive," says Father Romanelli, "is distributed to all the displaced people. Where possible, we also distribute drinking water to families from neighbouring areas who come to us and ask for it. The parish is united with the al-Zaytoun neighbourhood and its inhabitants, trying to do what it can to alleviate their suffering."



But it is only a drop in the ocean of needs. The priest denounced: "The humanitarian corridor that has been opened at the Rafah crossing is not enough to meet the needs of the population of the Gaza Strip. Before the war in Gaza, hundreds of trucks of humanitarian aid entered every day and it was not enough. How can 20 trucks a day be enough now? Rafah must always be open. The needs were huge before and they are even bigger now. More humanitarian corridors need to be opened." But first of all, for Father Romanelli, "We need an immediate ceasefire and to work towards ensuring that the hostages are released. There are also thousands of wounded people who need medical treatment." "A cessation of hostilities - he reiterated - is necessary to help the population. The people forced to leave their homes have nothing left, not even some flour they used to keep in their pantry. The population needs everything". "The parishioners," said the priest of Argentine origin, "are asking us to 'pray and to speak out.'" "May all those who ask for peace and believe in peace pray and may their voices be heard so that this humanitarian tragedy may be known." In one word: "pray for peace."

